



by Phil Edwards

The Creature Movies

We take a retrospective look at the three Creature movies, *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, *Revenge of the Creature* and *The Creature Walks Among Us*.

Universal Pictures created a gallery of classic movie monsters in the 30s. *Dracula*, *Frankenstein's Monster*, *The Wolfman*, *The Mummy* and all their various sons and daughters provided the studio with a rich reserve to draw from, and kept the company in profits well into the late 40s.

With the 50s boom in sci-fi films — and particularly the related sci-fi/horror genre — it was only natural that Universal would seek to create a character monster which would serve as a 50s equivalent of the fiends of yore. Where *Dracula*, *Frankenstein* and

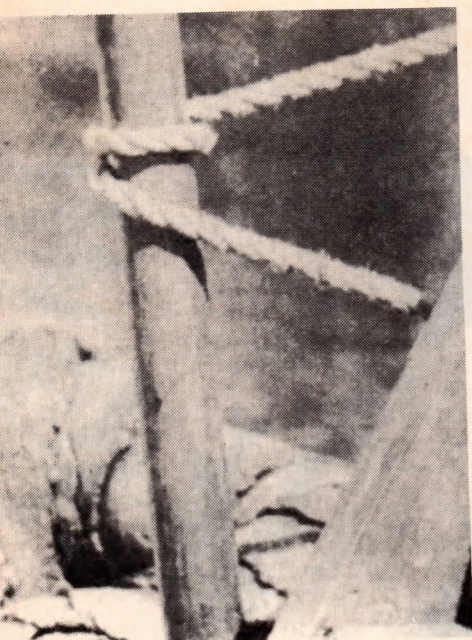
Co had had their origins in Victorian literature and assorted folk tales, Universal's new monster was the creation of producer William Alland.

Alland had had a great success with *It Came From Outer Space*, directed by Jack Arnold in the 3D process, and with the boffo box office of other stereoscopic features (*House of Wax*, *The Maze*, *Phantom of the Rue Morgue*) Universal were keen to find another horror subject which could be shot in the process.

The physical look of the Creature came from the combined talents of

director Jack Arnold and resident Universal make-up artist supremo Bud Westmore. In an interview in 1975 Arnold recalled: "I remember one day I was looking at the certificate I received when I was nominated for an Academy Award. There was a picture of the Oscar statuette on it. I said: 'If we put a grilled head on it, plus scales and fins, that would look pretty much like the kind of creature we're trying to get'."

Arnold's rough design was handed over to Westmore and his team of Jack Kevan, Chris Mueller and Bob Hickman. Mueller sculpted the



creature's head over an old bust of Ann Sheridan. (Mueller is one of the great unsung masters of plaster work and was responsible for the interior of the Nautilus in Disney's *20,000 Leagues Under The Sea*). Westmore added the effect of a noseless monster, feeling such a design added to the horror value. It was also decided to equip the Creature with giant crab claws and a slashing tail. But as the suit was being designed it was discovered the claws would be unworkable and the tail would severely restrict the suits' wearer in the extensive underwater sequences written into the script by Harry Essex and Arthur Ross.

Originally, Glenn Strange was considered for the role of the Creature. Strange had made a minor name for himself as Frankenstein's Monster in such latter features as *House of*

Frankenstein and *House of Dracula*. In an interview with Don Glut in 1965 he recalled: "I just swim. I was supposed to play *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* too, but that was another underwater hazard. They told me how much water there was, and I said: 'No, I don't want it.' It turned out they used a swimming double after all — Ricou Browning from Hawaii."

Browning had been discovered by Arnold while the director was scouting locations in Florida. Browning's ability to hold his breath underwater for up to five minutes meant the Creature could be featured in extended underwater scenes. However, Browning was relatively small in stature — something that didn't really matter in the underwater scenes, but would be unsuitable for the land-based

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sequences. To fill out the form-fitting suit constructed by Westmore's team, an ex-marine named Ben Chapman was chosen. Browning's suit was considerably lighter in colour to Chapman's to allow it to show up against the darker underwater backgrounds, shot in Silver Springs, Florida (where most of the MGM Tarzan films had been lensed).

The Creature from the Black Lagoon is a superbly structured film which, while obeying all the rules of the monster movie genre, manages to create an air of quiet poetry, particularly in the extensive underwater sequences.

These scenes are even more effective when seen in the 3D process. Jack Arnold proved with this film and its sequel that he was a master of stereoscopes. Arnold's control over the cameras enhances the visuals in a truly striking fashion. In particular, two major underwater sequences show his ability to use the process to heighten dramatic effect. The first is the justly famous "underwater ballet" performed by Julia Adams. At first the Creature simply watches her, fascinated by this beautiful intruder. Then, as he realises that she poses no threat, he swims towards her (and the audience) and mimics her movements. To see such a beautifully primal and grotesque creation moving with such grace fills the screen with a sub-textual eroticism quite uncommon in cinema. The 3D adds a further air of dreamy sexuality. When the Creature finally moves close enough to touch Ms Adams' ankle, it's almost like receiving an electric shock.

Another scene, equally potent in its imagery — though this time of an horrific nature — is the sequence in which the lagoon's intruders throw a powdered drug into the water in an effort to stun the seemingly all-powerful and intelligent monster. As the drug disperses and there is no sign of the Creature, Richard Carlson and Richard Denning don diving gear and descend into the black depths. Suddenly, the Creature is upon them and an all-out battle ensues. Frightening in its ferocity, and enhanced by Arnold's rapid and dramatic editing, the sequence has a



nightmarish quality which lends credence to a theory, held by myself and several other followers of Arnold's work, that the director deliberately uses Earth as an alien landscape. The scene ends with a vicious attack on Denning by the Creature, which leaves the scientist dead. The final shot of his body, floating to the surface as the torn air line pumps oxygen uselessly into the water, remains one of the most potent images in all fantasy cinema.

Completed on a budget of \$250,000, the film was a huge success, grossing \$3 million in its first run. Universal had what they wanted, and the Creature rapidly became as much a fantasy film icon to the studio as Dracula and friends.

With such success it was inevitable the studio would demand a sequel. One year after the release of the first film they prepared the follow-up, *Revenge of the Creature*. Scripted by Martin Berkley — and once again directed by Jack Arnold in 3D — the story begins with another expedition to the Black Lagoon. This time it is led by

John Agar (probably the most expressionless actor of all time) and John Bromfield. At first it appears the film is going to be little more than a re-run of the original, but Arnold quickly dispenses with the lagoon setting and shifts the action to Florida's Marineland, where the Creature has been taken for study.

The scenes in which the Creature, drugged and helpless, is walked like a sleeping shark around a pool, only to revive suddenly and make a break for freedom, set the tone of the film. *Revenge of the Creature*, by relocating the monster in an urban environment (and therefore bringing him into closer contact with people other than scientists) hints at the violence to come. For *Revenge* is by far the most violent of the three Creature features.

The early scenes in Marineland, where the now fully awake monster is chained in a tank and kept under control with electric cattle prods, introduce an element of sadism missing from the original. The sexual element in *Revenge* is also stronger,



Unchained Malady — the creature breaks loose.



though unfortunately it lacks the poetic visual nuances of the first film. Replacing Julia Adams is busty Universal starlet Lori Nelson. As with her predecessor, the Creature takes an instant shine to her and in an extraordinary scene breaks into a restaurant where Nelson and Agar are having dinner and carries her off.

When she is found some time later her state of dishevelment seems to indicate she has been violated by the Creature, and the visual implication adds to the sense of growing physical violence.

For this feature Ricou Browning took over the role totally, and subtle changes were made to the costume. The eyes now bulged more and the lips were made fuller and more fish-like. Though the film was shot in 3D it received only a limited release in this format. The year was 1955 and the public were tiring of the craze.

In many ways *Revenge of the Creature* is the perfect sequel. It captures much of the excitement of the original without being a simple run

through. An attempt is made to make the Creature more sympathetic, and for the most part it's successful. The scenes of violence are often outlandish: in one of them the monster picks up a man and literally wraps him around a tree! Other scenes showing the Creature overturning cars, crashing into restaurants, and being exhibited to a gawping public add to the surrealist imagery.

Revenge of the Creature proved almost as successful as the original and Universal, true to tradition, felt they could eek out one more feature.

The job of direction was assigned to John Sherwood, who was also responsible for *The Monolith Monsters*, probably the most interesting of all 50s sci-fi thrillers. Sadly, Sherwood was little more than a competent craftsman and *The Creature Walks Among Us* lacks many of the high points of the first two films.

It would be easy to dismiss *Walks Among Us* as the last gasp of the Creature cycle, and in many respects it is little more than a programmer. However, scripter Arthur Ross realised that to simply pen another Gill Man story would severely strain the imagination (after all the Creature would seem to have been thoroughly killed off in the previous films) and would turn the story into nothing more than a standard opus about a monster on the loose — something the cinemas were already full of.

Instead, Ross devised a story which would humanise the Creature. The monster is found hiding in the Florida Everglades and while a capture is being attempted, is severely burned.

Apparently dead, he is taken to a laboratory where it is discovered that he is simply in shock. An X-ray reveals the monster is equipped with almost human lungs. A quick snip by scientist Jeff Morrow and the Gill Man no longer needs water to sustain his life. But instinct proves stronger than vivisection, and the Creature spends most of the film's scant 78 minutes trying to return to the water.

Unfortunately, like so many 50s low budget sci-fi films, characterisation of the humans in the story is spartan. At best they seem an unlikeable bunch, and constantly squabble among themselves. This brings the humanity of the captured monster into sharper focus. Where in the first two films the monster initiates the action and acts as an aggressor/protector, for *Walks Among Us* he spends much of his time either comatose on an operating table or penned up like an overgrown dog. With his scales burnt off he is dressed in a rough canvas suit, and along with the guttural grunting he emits, it is easy to draw a comparison with the *Frankenstein Monster* of old — a victim of science gone wild.

Like previous outings, *Creature Walks Among Us* has a monster with an eye for the leading lady — in this case Leigh Snowden.

To some, *The Creature Walks Among Us* marks a sad end to the series. However, in my view the closing shot contains as much beauty as either of the previous movies. Moving inexorably onwards, to the cliffs overlooking the ocean, drawn by an instinct he can't understand but can only follow, the Creature plunges to his final resting place — drowned by the lungs created by the scientists.

A considerable amount of Creature merchandise has appeared over the years. Comic books, plastic kits and various novelisations have appeared, ensuring that the image of the Gill Man is part of most people's sub-conscious.

In recent years John Landis announced he was going to remake Arnold's classic by combining the stories of *Creature* and *Revenge*. The project has been on/off for two or three years, but it would now seem the film is in active pre-production. Landis will serve as executive producer, and as of this writing, Jack Arnold is slated as director. Rob Bottin has been mentioned as possible creator of effects and it will be interesting to see if recent developments in special effects technology will be able to add much more to the rubber suit created by Bud Westmore. Whether Arnold will be able to recapture the sheer visual poetry in this remake is open to doubt.